

A VISIT TO THE TOMB OF THOMAS SAY IN NEW HARMONY, INDIANA

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Thomas Say, often styled the Father of American Entomology, left Philadelphia near the end of 1825 to take part in a new sociological experiment. At Pittsburgh he boarded a specially made keel boat that was nicknamed the Boatload of Knowledge because of the cargo it carried — scientists, teachers, artists and other intellectuals. Down the Ohio River they went, until at the southwestern corner of Indiana they made their way up the Wabash River to settle early in 1826 at a small town called New Harmony.

This experiment or movement was the brain-child of Robert Owen, a wealthy Welsh mill owner. He planned to establish a new communal or communistic system to improve the lot of workers during the industrial revolution. Owen went to Philadelphia to gather intellectuals to his movement; it was to be a society led, not by politicians, but by intellectuals, teachers, and scientists. In Philadelphia Owen convinced William Maclure, a wealthy geologist, to invest in the movement, and it was Maclure who convinced many scientists, Say included, to join the movement. Maclure had long been Say's sponsor.

To begin his movement, Owen bought the town of New Harmony, a town that had been built in the wilderness in 1814 by a religious group led by George Rapp. After the sale, Rapp's group, called Harmonists or Rappites, moved to western Pennsylvania.

Owen attracted many people, later called Owenites, to his movement, but after only a few years the movement failed and the town returned to private ownership. Even so, many of the members, including Say, stayed in New Harmony. It was in that town that Say continued his work on insects. He became a leader in the town and eventually lived in a great house formerly used by Rapp and Maclure. In that house Say died on October 10, 1834.

Say was buried in a grave that is unknown today, according to Webster (1895:102), but in 1846 his body was moved to a brick underground vault behind the Rapp-Maclure house. Webster's account stated that the vault was "entirely covered over with earth," but he also described the interior of the vault. Perhaps the entrance to the vault was uncovered at that time. The interior had platforms of solid brickwork; on the east and west side were the remains of Alexander, Anna, and

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Margaret Maclure, the brother and sister of William Maclure. On one of the platforms on the north side of the vault were the remains of Thomas Say. Atop the north end of the earthen mound was an inscribed, white marble, memorial shaft dedicated to Say and erected in 1846. The ownership of the house and tomb and the care that was to be given to the latter was discussed by Webster (1903:94) and Howard (1903:138). All of these facts are recorded in the biography of Say by Weiss and Ziegler (1931).

Today the vault itself cannot be seen or opened: it is completely hidden under a grass-covered, elongate mound of earth. The memorial shaft is still in place. The mound and shaft can be seen on the west side of Main Street, between Church and Granary Streets. Webster's account of access to the interior of the vault was partially corroborated in a conversation I had with Anna Deischer in New Harmony in 1980. She told me that her mother often spoke of descending a few steps into the vault and touching the bones of Say and others on the platforms. The entrance to the vault was obviously still open when her mother was a little girl, about 1900. I have not been able to determine when the vault was completely sealed.

I met Anna Deischer when she was a guide in Rapp Dwelling No. 2, a large building across Main Street from the vault and the Rapp-Maclure house. No. 2 was used by the Harmonists as living quarters for many people; it was called a Brüder Haus. At present, in a large room on the south end of the first floor there is an antique print shop, called the Bennett-Slater Newspaper Museum, and it was into this shop that Mrs. Deischer sent me for more information on Say. On a long, sturdy table was a large, rectangular, incised, white marble slab, the kind of slab usually seen covering graves (fig. 1). Incised into the surface of the slab were a few lines (fig. 2):

THOMAS SAY
Son of Dr Benjamin Say
One of the Founders of the Academy
of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia
Born in Philadelphia
June 27th 1787
Died at New Harmony
October 10th 1834

I have not been able to determine if the slab was used in the vault or on the unknown grave. Because of its smooth surface, it is being used in the print shop as a composing table. A similar slab at the print shop was incised with the names of Maclures.

Finding the Say slab in the print shop was a surprise, but finding it hidden under equipment, type, and stacks of paper was even more sur-



Figure 1. Print shop in Dwelling No. 2; Say grave slab on table.

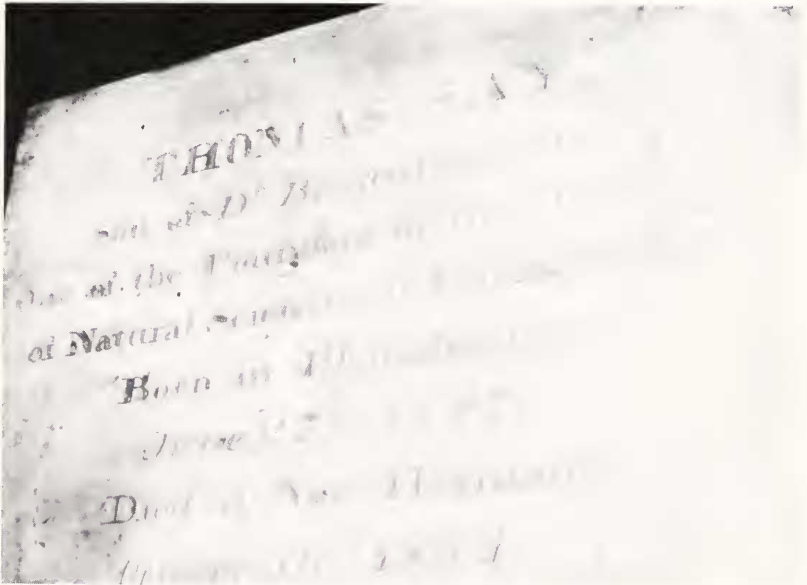


Figure 2. Part of Say grave slab with incised wording.

prising. The slab could easily be damaged. It should be protected and exhibited for all to see.

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